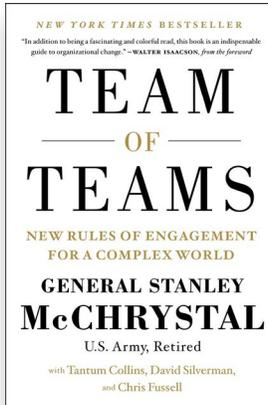


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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**General Stanley
McChrystal**

General Stanley McChrystal retired from the U.S. Army as a four-star general after thirty-four years of service. His last assignment was as the commander of all American and coalition forces in Afghanistan.

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THE SUMMARY

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Introduction

It is important to state up front what this book is and what it is not. This isn't a war story, although our experience in the fight against Al Qaeda weaves through this book. Far beyond soldiers, it is a story about big guys and little guys, butterflies, gardeners, and chess masters. The reader will meet slimy toads, mythical beasts, clanging machines, and sensitive ecosystems.

The genesis of this story lies in the transformation of an elite military organization, the Joint Special Operations Task Force ("the Task Force") in the midst of a war. We could compare ourselves during that transition to a professional football team changing from one offensive system to another in the second quarter of a critical game, but the reality was far more drastic. The Task Force's shift was actually more akin to that team's moving from playing football to basketball, and finding that habits and preconceptions had to be discarded along with pads and cleats.

Little of our transformation was planned. Few of the plans that we did develop unfolded as envisioned. Instead, we evolved in rapid iterations, *changing—assessing—changing again*. Intuition and hard-won experience became the beacons, often dimly visible, that guided us through the fog and friction. Over time we realize that we were not in search of the perfect solution as none existed. The environment in

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which we found ourselves demanded a dynamic, constantly adapting approach. For a soldier trained at West Point as an engineer, the idea that a problem has different solutions on different days was fundamentally disturbing, yet that was the case.

We hope to help the reader understand what's different in today's world, and what we must do about it. We're not lazier or less intelligent than our parents or grandparents, but what worked for them simply won't do the trick for us now. We will argue that the familiar pursuit of efficiency must change course. Efficiency remains important, but the ability to adapt to complexity and continual change has become an imperative.

Using our experience in war, combined with a range of examples from business, hospitals, nongovernmental organizations, as well as more unlikely sources, we lay out the symptoms of the problem, its root causes, and the approaches that we and others have found effective. Readers will understand and appreciate the challenges they face and be able to frame what makes sense for them.

Before we begin, a thought occurs that there's a temptation for all of us to blame failures on factors outside our control. Few of us are criticized if we faithfully do what has worked in the past many times before. There's likely a place in paradise for people who tried hard, but what really matters is succeeding. If that requires you to change, that's your mission.

PART I: THE PROTEUS PROBLEM

Chapter 1: Sons of Proteus

Shipwrecked on the island of Pharos following the ten-year-long Trojan War, Menelaus and his men had to defeat the immortal god Proteus in order to gain from him the secrets they needed to get home to Sparta. This would be difficult because Proteus was a shape-shifter or a polymorph.

As Proteus emerged salty and frothing from the roiling sea, Menelaus and his men, disguised in sealskins, lay in ambush on the beach. When they attacked, Proteus shifted first into a great bearded lion, then a serpent, a panther, a ramping wild boar, a torrent of water and then a tree with soaring branch tops.

Still the Greeks clung firmly. Their normal weapons of little use, with each shift, they shifted, with each new challenge, they changed, clenching their legs tight around the necks of the animals, digging their fingers into the wooden limbs of trees, wrapping their arms around swirling balls of mercurial fire. Finally, Proteus was defeated. By adapting, the Greeks found their way home.

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The Al Qaeda in Iraq that our Task Force confronted in 2004 looked on the surface like a traditional insurgency. Under the surface it operated unlike anything we had seen before. In the place of a traditional hierarchy, it took the form of a dispersed network that proved devastatingly effective against our objectively more qualified force.

Al Qaeda's unorthodox and highly-adaptive structure allowed it to thrive in an operating environment that diverged radically from those we had traditionally faced. The twenty-first century is more connected, faster paced, and less predictable than previous eras. Though we encountered this shift on the battlefield, similar changes are affecting almost every sector of society. To win we had to change. Surprisingly, that change was less about tactics or new technology than it was about the internal architecture and culture of our force, which in other words, was our approach to management.

Chapter 2: Clockwork

Our Task Force's structure and culture of disciplined, stratified reductionism had its roots deep in military organizational history. The pursuit of predictability—carefully delineated instructions, easily replicable procedures, fastidious standardization, and a tireless focus on efficiency—is foundational to the military's struggle against the chaos always threatening to engulf combat operations. At the scale of the U.S. armed forces, standardization is a necessity. Historically, this quest for order has produced impressive results.

This organizational culture is not unique to the military. Since the Industrial Revolution, most industries have subscribed to management doctrines informed by or similar to Frederick Taylor's "Scientific Management". This is a system that is excellent for achieving high efficiency of known, repeatable processes at scale.

We were realizing in 2004 that despite the success of this approach throughout the twentieth century, it had its limits. Like the Maginot Line, the impenetrable system of tunnels and interlocking fields of fire built along the border to protect France from German attack, it was insufficient for tackling a new generation of threats from airplanes and enemies that chose not to play by the rules. Efficiency is no longer enough.

Combat parachuting offers a microcosm of the paradox inherent in military operations. Time and again, paratroopers in combat find themselves scattered across the countryside, minus their vehicles and ammunition, and forced to self-organize into LGOPs (little groups of paratroopers) that accomplish the mission as best they can. Even when they land together, paratrooper battalions are still isolated inside enemy territory, without the luxury of immediate reinforcement, and limited more or less to what they can carry for supplies. To stand any chance of succeeding, they must learn to get the most out of the little that they have.

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Chapter 3: From Complicated to Complex

The technological changes of recent decades have led to a more interdependent and fast-paced world. This creates a state of complexity. My granddaughter, Emmylou, was born June 4, 2014. She will grow up in a world defined by the near-instant transmission of information and rapid transportation of people, goods, and services. She is a “digital native,” while I will always remain, at best, the holder of a green card.

The world in which Emmylou will grow up is not just marginally different from that of previous generations; it is vastly faster and more interdependent, and thus essentially complex in entirely new ways. She lives in the wayward swirl which is a totally different place than the clockwork universe. We get in trouble when we try to use tools designed for the latter to tinker with the former.

Complexity produces a fundamentally different situation from the complicated challenges of the past; complicated problems required great effort, but ultimately yielded to prediction. Complexity means that, in spite of our increased abilities to track and measure, the world has become, in many ways, vastly less predictable.

When musician Dave Carroll’s guitar was broken by United Airlines baggage handlers, after struggling nine months in the telephone-directory maze of customer service to no avail, he wrote a song called “United Breaks Guitars” and posted it on YouTube. Within one day the video had racked up 150,000 hits and Carroll got a personal call from United. Within three days the video had more than a million hits and United’s stock price fell 10 percent, costing shareholders \$180 million in value—600,000 times the value of the guitar.

In Iraq, we encountered unprecedented levels of disruption. One operation or one misstep of ours or one piece of effective Al Qaeda propaganda could make the social media rounds and spark riots within hours. One video of a militant attack would have an immediate effect on insurgent recruitment numbers and sectarian reprisals, and all of these events happened almost every day. We have moved from data-poor but fairly predictable settings to data-rich, uncertain ones. This unpredictability is fundamentally incompatible with reductionist managerial models based around planning and prediction. The new environment demands a new approach.

Chapter 4: Doing the Right Thing

When the Task Force was focused on hunting down former associates of Saddam Hussein, we used our best night raid procedures, we used our fast-roping skills, we “offset” our assaults from the actual targets and foot-marched in to maximize surprise, and we deployed “close quarters battle” tactics when we entered houses, clearing them room by room and floor by floor.

When the war shifted from defeating Saddam to countering the Al Qaeda-led insurgency, we applied the same tactics, but it was much harder. They had been watching. They knew we preferred

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to operate at night because of our night-vision advantage, so they departed their safe houses at dusk, dispersing and sleeping in the surrounding fields. They saw how we assaulted and cleared houses, so they began placing machine guns in “pill boxes” at the tops of staircases lying in wait. They knew we sought to capture their leaders to gain intelligence, so many of them took to sleeping in suicide vests.

We were stronger, more efficient and more robust but Al Qaeda was agile and resilient. Developing resilience and learning how to reconfigure to confront the unknown are much more effective ways to respond to a complex environment. Since the pursuit of efficiency can limit flexibility and resilience, we concluded the Task Force would have to pivot away from seeing efficiency as the managerial Holy Grail. In the wayward swirl, the correlation between efficiency and effectiveness breaks down. The Task Force had built systems that were very good at doing things right, but too inflexible to do the right thing.

For example, when intelligence collected in Mosul indicates that a major attack on civilians will take place in Basra unless a SEAL team launches a raid that night; a raid for which there is not time to plan, let alone send data back and forth from Washington. Connecting all those dots on the fly would require a flexibility that our Task Force just did not have. To confront a constantly shifting threat in a complex setting, we would have to pursue adaptability.

Our foe, Al Qaeda, appeared to achieve this adaptability by way of their networked structure, which could organically reconfigure with surprising agility and resilience. We realized that in order to prevail, our Task Force would need to become a true network.

PART II: FROM MANY, ONE

Chapter 5: From Command to Team

One of the most famous upsets in athletic history was when the 2004 U.S. Olympic basketball “Dream Team” (featuring veterans and rising talent like LeBron James, Dwyane Wade, Carmelo Anthony, Tim Duncan, Allen Iverson, and others) lost 92-72 to Puerto Rico. (They ultimately took third place behind Italy and Argentina.) What was an embarrassment for America was vindication for coaches worldwide who have spent years saying, “There is no I in team”; it proved that teams can be either far less or far more than the sum of their rosters.

There are fundamental structural differences that separate commands from teams. The former is rooted in reductionist prediction, and very good at executing planned procedures efficiently. The latter is less efficient, but much more adaptable.

Teams are imbued with a connectively of trust and purpose that provides them with an ability to solve problems that could never be foreseen by a single manager. Their solutions often emerge as the bottom-up result of interactions, rather than from top-down orders.

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For our operators in Iraq, a million incidents could derail a carefully assembled plan. Two men sleeping in the street could change the “infil route.” A sudden need for air support halfway across the country could reduce the assets available for backup, which in turn would alter the level of risk that our operators could take on. An unexpected civilian presence on target could change the parameters of acceptable action. Even the best technology and the finest intelligence cannot tell you exactly what to expect. Once the first shot is fired, reality diverges from expectation very quickly.

One can make contingency plans, but these can account for only a modest number of possibilities. A contingency plan is like a tree that branches at every variable outcome (if they fire when we arrive, choose path A; if not, choose path B). Our operators’ most useful preparation lay in the trust they had built with each other, shared hardship by shared hardship, over years of training and service. The growing adaptability of the Task Force’s teams in Iraq represented a valuable start, but we would have to build that same adaptability at a much greater scale. We had honed the traits of trust and purpose at the team level, but our organization at large was the complete opposite. It was a classic command.

Our Task Force was used to clean lines and right angles thinking so Al Qaeda’s networked structure had puzzled us. It took us too long to recognize that we were seeing the connectivity of small teams, scaled to the size of a full enterprise. None of Al Qaeda’s individual elements was better than ours, but that did not matter. A team, unlike a conventional command, is not the sum of its parts. Even if their nodes were weak, their network was strong. Our challenge, now that we understood it, was to find a way to reshape our structure to create a team-like oneness across an organization of thousands.

Chapter 6: Team of Teams

There is a catchy acronym in the consulting world, “MECE,” which stands for “mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive.” A MECE breakdown takes something like customers and segments it into a series of categories that do not overlap, but together cover everything. Customers might be divided into “paying customers” and “non-paying customers” and no customer will be in more than one place. There is something very satisfying about the way a MECE framework clicks together. It is tidy and effective way to organize categories, but it is not always an effective way to organize people.

Teams can bring a measure of adaptability to previously rigid organizations. Although teams have proliferated across many sectors, they have almost always done so in the confines of broader commands. More and more organizations will need to overcome this hurdle and become more adaptable.

Although our Task Force’s constituent teams exemplified adaptability, a command like superstructure constrained the organization at large. This “command of teams” approach was more flexible than a conventional command, but was still not adaptable enough to deal with the complexities of the twenty-first century and battle Al Qaeda.

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We also discovered that many of the traits that made our teams so good also made it incredibly difficult to scale those traits across our organization. We realized we were also up against some fundamental constraints. Building a single team the size of our Task Force would be impossible. We wanted to scale the magic of the team into a realizable goal.

The solution we devised was a “team of teams” or an organization within which the relationships between constituent teams resembled those between individuals on a single team. Teams that had traditionally resided in separate silos would now have to become fused to one another via trust and purpose.

We needed the SEALs to trust Army Special Forces, and for them to trust the CIA, and for them all to be bound by a sense of common purpose which was winning the war, rather than outperforming the other unit.

PART III: SHARING

Chapter 7: Seeing the System

Like NASA’s Apollo moon landing program before it, our Task Force found itself confronted with a complex problem that demanded a systems approach to its solution. The interdependence of the operating environment meant both organizations would need members to understand the entire, interconnected system, not just individual MECE boxes on the organizational chart.

An emphasis on group success spurs cooperation, and generally fosters trust and purpose, but people cooperate only if they can see the independent reality of their environment. SEAL trainees learn to work together on the water when they can see that one individual’s failure will result in a flipped boat, and if that happens, the whole group will suffer.

In our Task Force, our specialized units had little insight into how their peer teams functioned, or how all the pieces fit together. Everyone knew the boat kept flipping, but without a clear view of what everyone else was doing, nobody could see why or how to change it.

Harnessing the capability of the entire geographically dispersed organization meant information sharing had to achieve levels of transparency entirely new to both organizations. So like NASA, we needed to promote at the organizational level the kind of knowledge pool that arises within small teams. This was the key to creating a “team of teams.”

We did not want all the teams to become generalists because SEALs are better at what they do than intel analysts would be and vice versa. Diverse specialized abilities are essential. We wanted to fuse generalized *awareness* with specializing *expertise*. Our entire force needed to share a fundamental, holistic understanding of the operating environment and of our own organization, and we also

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needed to preserve each team's distinct skill sets. We dubbed this goal—this state of emergent, adaptive organizational intelligence—shared consciousness, and it became the cornerstone of our transformation.

Chapter 8: Brains Out of the Footlocker

Shared consciousness in an organization is either hindered or helped by physical spaces and established processes. Often, efforts to facilitate Taylor-inspired efficiencies have produced barriers to information sharing and the kind of systematic understanding we needed to pervade our Task Force.

Creating transparency and information sharing at the scale we needed required not only a redesign of our physical plant, but also a rethinking of almost every procedure in our organizational culture. Shared consciousness demanded the adoption of extreme transparency throughout our force and with our partner forces—not the “transparency” of personal candidness, but the transparency that provided every team with an unobstructed, constantly up-to-date view of the rest of the organization. We acknowledged that we often could not predict who would and would not benefit from access to certain information.

Our daily Operations and Intelligence (O&I) briefing was the heart muscle at the core of our transformation. This meeting ran six days a week and pumped information about the entire scope of our operations out to all members of the Task Force and partner agencies, and also offered everyone a chance to contribute. Technically it was complex and financially it was expensive, but we were trying to build a culture of sharing.

Are there risks involved with sharing valuable data? Our experience was that shared information saved lives on an untold scale. Keeping our “brains in a footlocker” benefitted no one, and taking them out was a critical step. However, achieving team-like levels of shared consciousness would take more than just sharing information.

Chapter 9: Beating the Prisoner's Dilemma

In the famous thought experiment, the Prisoner's Dilemma, two criminals—co-conspirators—are arrested. They are taken to separate cells and interrogated. Both are offered the same deal. If you stay silent you'll be sentenced to one year. If you rat on your partner you'll go free. If your partner rats on you, you'll serve two years. From a competitive, personal-interest perspective, both prisoners are incentivized to rat. But if both prisoners rat then they both end up with a worse deal—serving two years—than they would have had they cooperated (each serving one year).

The Prisoner's Dilemma has interesting management implications. First, it suggests that there are circumstances in which cooperation is better than competition. (Adam Smith, the father of modern economics, taught, “In competition, individual ambition serves the common good.”) Many managers assume that the healthy competitiveness between companies (the lifeblood of the free market)

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should be echoed within companies. In an interdependent environment, however, collaboration may be necessary to survival.

Cooperation across silos would be necessary for success, and while systemic understanding was a valuable first step, we needed to build more trust if we were to achieve the fluid, team-like cooperation that we needed across our force. We were a real-life Prisoner's Dilemma. Each agency feared that sharing intelligence would work against its own interest. Competition between agencies made them reluctant to provide information. What if a partner agency didn't reciprocate? If each agency would cooperate, we would have the best possible outcome, but we could achieve that outcome only if we overcame the dilemma.

Incentivizing collaboration, however, is easier said than done. For starters, both prisoners must be shown the entire decision-making system, not just their own choices. If shown only their own fate, each prisoner will choose to betray the other. It is only when they are shown the decision-making stakes of the accomplice that they understand the consequences. Even with holistic awareness, the prisoners still have to take a leap of faith.

To this end, we used embedding and liaison programs to create strong lateral ties between our units, and with our partner organizations. We would take an individual from one team—say, an Army Special Forces operator—and assign him to a different part of our force for six months such as a team of SEALs, for example, or a group of analysts. Our hope was that by allowing our operators to see how the war looked from inside other groups, and by building personal relationships, we could build between teams some of the fluency that traditionally exists within teams.

Where systematic understanding mirrors the sense of "purpose" of a team and bonds small teams, lateral connectivity mirrors the second ingredient to team formation which is "trust."

PART IV: LETTING GO

Chapter 10: Hands Off

New technologies offer today's leaders unprecedented opportunities to gather information and direct operations, but because of the speed necessary to remain competitive, centralization of power now comes at a great cost. While shared consciousness had helped us overcome the interdependence of the environment, *speed*, the second ingredient of complexity still posed a challenge.

Paradoxically, the seemingly instantaneous communications available up and down the hierarchy has slowed rather than accelerated decision making. Repeatedly we have navigated approval processes that went all the way to the Pentagon or the White House for strikes against terrorist leaders we'd located, for the deployment of forces, or for the implementation of information campaigns. Communications may have been instantaneous, but decisions never were. The aggregate effects were crippling.

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Within the Task Force, thanks to radical information sharing, people at every level of the organization had the information and connectivity to determine what the right thing to do was, in real time. Held back by our internal processes, they lacked the ability to act on that determination. It's as if we had built an outstanding soccer team bound together by the oneness of trust and purpose. We were capable of devising, in real time, brilliant, emergent solutions to complex problems, but we still required every player to get written permission from the coach before passing the ball.

Meanwhile, senior leaders from Iraq to Washington had in-boxes overflowing with requests to do things that they knew less about than the people on the ground and about which they were often unable to judge effectively. This organizational impediment, like so many we had already dismantled, had its roots in the practical problem solving of another era. Traditionally, organizations have implemented as much control over subordinates as technology physically allowed.

In 2004 Iraq, the risks of acting too slowly were higher than the risks of letting competent people make judgment calls. The wait for my approval was not resulting in better decisions, and our priority should be reaching the best possible decision that could be made in a time frame that allowed it to be relevant. I communicated across the command my thought processes on decisions like airstrikes, and told them to make the call.

Whoever made the decision, I was always ultimately responsible, but this way our team would be empowered to do what was needed. Effective adaptation to emerging threats and opportunities requires the disciplined practice of empowered execution. Individuals and teams closest to the problem, armed with unprecedented levels of insights from across the network, ordinarily offer the best ability to decide and act decisively. Our experience was that the quality of decisions actually went up.

Chapter 11: Leading like a Gardener

Although we intuitively know the world has changed, most leaders reflect a model, and leader development process, that are sorely out of date. We often demand unrealistic levels of knowledge in leaders and force them into ineffective attempts to micromanage.

The doctrine of empowered execution may at first glance seem to suggest that leaders are no longer needed. In fact, senior leaders are now more important than ever, but the role is very different from that of the traditional heroic decision maker. The idea that a heroic leader can simultaneously control a thousand marionettes on as many stages is unrealistic.

In the Task Force, we found that, alongside our new approach to management, we had to develop a new paradigm of personal leadership. The role of the senior leader was no longer that of a controlling puppet master, but rather that of an empathetic crafter of culture.

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My laptop had special software that enabled me to monitor (and speak to) any part of our force on internal radio nets. In real time I could see what was happening and hear their discussions, but I never told operators what to do on a raid. I was most effective when I supervised processes—from intelligence operations to the prioritization of resources—ensuring that we avoided the silos or bureaucracy that doomed agility, rather than making individual operational decisions.

A gardening approach to leadership is anything but passive. The leader acts as an “Eyes-On, Hands-Off” enabler who creates and maintains an ecosystem in which the organization operates and remains viable. The temptation to lead as a chess master, controlling each move of the organization, must give way to an approach as a gardener, enabling rather than directing. Within our Task Force, as in a garden, the outcome was less dependent on the initial planting than on constant maintenance. The gardener cannot actually “grow” tomatoes, squash, or beans—she can only foster an environment in which the plants do so.

Chapter 12: Symmetries

There is no such thing as an organizational panacea as the details will always be different for different people, places, and objectives. However, we believe that our model provides a good blueprint. As our Task Force transformed itself, both our speed and precision improved dramatically. This was not a triumph of fine-tuning it into a hyper-efficient machine. Rather, over time it had become a more transparent, more organic entity.

The Task Force still had ranks and each member was still assigned a particular team and sub-sub-command, but we all understood that we were now part of a network. When we visualized our own force on the whiteboards, it now took the form of webs and nodes, not tiers and silos. To defeat a network, we had become a network. We had become a team of teams.

Technology has been both a cause of our challenge and a tool for our success, but it was the culture change in the organization that allowed the Task Force to use it properly. At the core of the Task Force’s journey to adaptability lay a yin-and-yang symmetry of shared consciousness. It was achieved through strict, centralized forums for communication and extreme transparency, together with empowered execution, which involved the decentralization of managerial authority. This powered our Task Force as neither would suffice alone.

Our transformation is reflective of the new generation of mental models we must adopt in order to make sense of the twenty-first century. If we do manage to embrace this change, we can unlock tremendous potential for human progress.